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Emily Stoper

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The Gender Gap Concealed and Revealed: 1936-1984

Emily Stoper
California State University, Hayward

Why do women vote so much like men—especially since they seem to think so differently on many political issues? The gender gap in presidential elections has never been higher than the unimpressive 7.6 percent that it attained in 1984.[1] The answers to this question illustrate not just gender differences in political behavior but also the way in which the American electoral system works. Briefly, the answer offered by this paper is that women's views have been muffled by the process by which political issues are framed, defined as salient and presented to the voters.

This interpretation, the reader should note, is very much at odds with the view held by most political scientists that the absence of a gender gap in voting is due to the similarity of views of women and men who have similar socio-economic characteristics.[2] There is a great deal of evidence that this theory is incorrect. This evidence will be traced from the suffrage movement up through the 1984 presidential election.

It is the thesis of this article that in at least three issue areas, all of which emerged during the suffrage battle, women have in fact voted differently in referenda and responded differently from men in polls and surveys, but that until the 1980s these differences have only rarely been translated (to a statistically significant degree) into different candidate votes or partisan affiliations due to certain peculiarities of the American political system. The three areas are: (1) political corruption, (2) war and peace, and (3) sumptuary legislation (now called "crimes without a victim"). The rest of this article will deal mainly with these three areas. The first presidential election year in which data from polls and surveys became available was 1936, so that date has been chosen as the start of the period under analysis.

The Three Areas

Let us now examine closely the three special areas in which women did display a distinctive political orientation: political reform, war and peace, and sumptuary legislation. The data are drawn from an examination of all the Gallup polls and as many surveys as could be obtained from the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan. It is impossible to present all the

data here, so examples have been selected, but in no case have data that contradicted the thesis been suppressed or ignored. Inalmost every case gender gaps in cross-tabulations of less than 5 points and in polls of less than 3 points were not considered statistically significant and therefore not reported, though they were not seen as counter-evidence when there were data from other years that were significant on a particular issue.

Political Reform and Gender

Let us turn first to political reform. For the 1920s, when this issue was highly salient in American politics, unfortunately we do not have much survey or poll data, but we do know that women were very active in the charter reform movement whose purpose was to make it increasingly difficult for bosses and their machines to dominate local government.[3] As late as 1959, men in Dahl's survey of the political participation and views of a cross-section of New Haven's population were far more likely than women to be opposed to charter revision (by 37 compared to 19 percent).[4] In five different recent SRC election surveys, women were more likely than men to perceive dishonest people in government. (In each case, a three-point scale was used.)

		M	W
1958	"Hardly Any"	29	23
1972	"Quite a Few"	35	40
1976	"Quite a Few"	40	47
1980	"Quite a Few"	44	51
1984	"Many"	31	36

War, Peace and Gender

There are numerous illustrations of the second major area in which women's political views differed from men's. In response to all the following questions in Gallup polls women were more non-interventionist than men. (Throughout this paper, all dates from Gallup between 1935 and 1971 are from the 1935-71 volumes. Months are given where they seem relevant.)

	% Yes	
	M	W
Should the Constitution be changed to require a national vote before Congress could draft men for war overseas?[6]	44	58

	% Yes	
	M	W
Should Congress give the army the right to send drafted soldiers to any part of the world, not just North and South America and US possessions?[6]	49	36
Suppose the German army gets rid of Hitler, gives up all the countries Germany has conquered and offers to make peace. Should we make peace or continue fighting until the German army is completely defeated?[7]		
"Continue fighting":	76	64

Foreshadowing their views on Vietnam, women were far more likely than men to say we were not right to get into the fighting in Korea and more likely to advocate pulling out.[8]

Women's noninterventionist views did not necessarily imply indifference to the fate of people living in foreign countries. Women were more likely than men to be willing to prolong food rationing here in order to send food to people in other nations.[9] It would appear that women are not "isolationists" but rather "cooperative internationalists," as distinct from "militant internationalists".[10]

The gender gap between women and men on attitudes toward war has persisted across many years. In 1958 and 1960 men were considerably more likely to disagree with the view that "isolationism" is best for the US.[11] In 1962, by 55 to 38%, men were more likely than women to favor resumption of nuclear testing in the atmosphere.[12] In 1983, men were far more likely than women (by 52 to 42 percent) to believe that falling behind in the arms race (as opposed to continuing the arms buildup) created the greater danger of nuclear war occurring.[13]

The war in Vietnam set gender differences in attitudes toward war in high relief.

	% Yes	
	M	W
Are you a "hawk" with regard to the Vietnam War?[14]	39	23
Should Congress vote to bring home all US troops before the end of the following year?[15]	46	64

	% Yes	
	M	**W**
Were we right in getting into the fighting in Vietnam?[16]	38	25

Women were repeatedly considerably more likely to favor immediate withdrawal and less likely to favor a "stronger stand."[17]

	M	**W**
What action should the US take if another nation is attacked by communist-backed forces?[18] "Send American troops"	37	18

Perhaps because they knew that it was men who were making the decisions about war and peace, women were more anxious and pessimistic than men. For example:

	M	**W**
How worried are you about the chances that a world atomic war will break out?[19] "Very Worried" (3-point scale):	15	27

Finally, women are more likely to take a pacifist position.

	M	**W**
Some people feel that war is an outmoded way of settling differences between nations (A), others that wars are sometimes necessary (B). With which do you agree?[20]		
A:	43	48
B:	49	38

Thus, the poll and survey data over many years establish a striking gender difference on the issues of war and peace. But were women able to translate their peace orientation into candidate votes? Not at all. In the 1940 presidential election, the gender gap was an insignificant 2.7 percentage points, with women slightly preferring Willkie, the Republican candidate. The gap in 1944 was virtually non-existent. When asked to give reasons for their 1940 vote, voters' responses indicated that they did not perceive any difference between the candidates on likelihood of going to war.[21] Similarly, in the 1950s Cold War era

women had no hope of having their more non-interventionist views represented in Washington.

The same frustration persisted into the Vietnam Era. In three 1967 polls, women more than men by 50-45, 45-38 and 55-48% favored the peace candidate Robert Kennedy (over the war leader Lyndon Johnson) as the 1968 Democratic nominee.[22] By 52 to 44%, they also preferred Robert Kennedy to Nixon, whereas men had exactly the reverse preference. Yet they never had the opportunity to vote for Kennedy or for any other peace candidate in the 1968 general election. They were about 5 points more likely to vote for Humphrey than men, about equally likely to vote for Nixon and about 5 points less likely to vote for George Wallace. Since there was no clear peace candidate and there were other issues involved (such as race), it is difficult to interpret this outcome, but it does seem clear at least that Wallace, whose running mate was Air Force General Curtis LeMay, was the most hawkish of the three candidates. In 1972, with the Vietnam War still dragging on, women were some 6.6 points more likely to vote for the peace candidate, George McGovern[23]—a rare instance of the political process offering women an opportunity to translate their preference for peace into votes for a candidate.

Alcohol, Marijuana and Gender

Women have been extraordinarily more favorable than men to Prohibition and its latter-day versions. The limited data we have about women's actual voting in the 1920s show their preference for enforcement of Prohibition clearly.[24] In the 1920 election in Chicago, where separate records by sex were kept for a few years, women were almost two and a half times as likely to vote for the Prohibition Party as men. Women were more likely to vote Prohibition in all wards, regardless of class, race and ethnicity. As late as 1954, 41 percent of women said they would vote for Prohibition, compared to 25 percent of men.[25] By 1984 these figures had been roughly cut in half, but the same gender gap existed.[26] In spite of the persistence of a substantial minority of pro-dry women, Prohibition has not been an issue on the national political agenda since the repeal of the 18th Amendment in 1933.

In the 1980s women continue to be considerably more willing than men to use state power to limit alcohol consumption.

	% Yes	
	M	**W**
Should a person who drives a car after having more than one drink be sent to jail?[27]	38	50

	% Yes	
	M	W
Do you favor a federal law requiring health and safety warning labels on alcoholic beverage containers?[28]	74	84
Do you favor federal excise taxes on alcoholic beverages to raise revenues to fight drug and alcohol abuse?[29]	61	70

In the 1970s, a new "prohibition" issue replaced the old one: legalization of marijuana. Women have consistently been far more likely than men to oppose legalization of marijuana and to advocate a stiffer penalty for sale and use.[30] In these surveys and polls, 25-30 percent of men and only 15-20 percent of women have favored the legalization of marijuana.

A Miscellany of Diversity

In addition to the three areas presented above, there are several other areas in which women have had significantly different attitudes from men over the long term. The most important one is social welfare spending.[31] Before the 1950s (but not since then), women were more feminist than men in their attitudes toward women's status.[32] Women seem to be slightly less racist than men (though the differences are not large), as judged by their responses to questions on making lynching a federal crime[33] and on whether the government in Washington should assure fair treatment for "Negroes" in jobs and housing.[34] No studies turned up in which women appeared more racist than men.

Perhaps consistent with their greater disapproval (and lesser use) of alcohol and marijuana, women were also more opposed to gambling.[35] In addition, they were far more likely than men to favor gun control.

		M	W
Should registration of all firearms be required?[36]	"Yes"	61	82

The above data may be understood to mean that women favor a greater degree of state control over individual behavior than men. However, other data indicate that women balk at some methods of control that men are more likely to approve. In nu-

merous Gallup polls women were less supportive of the death penalty than men.[37] Women were also significantly less likely than men to favor stricter discipline in the schools,[38] wiretapping[39] and whipping of criminals.[40]

Sources of Women's Different Views

Thus, in three issue areas (political corruption, war and peace and sumptuary legislation), women had distinctly different views from men. The three areas, as well as the miscellaneous other differences just cited, may have emerged from what Carol Gilligan has called "a different voice," by which she means a moral perspective that emphasizes a home-based community or network based on nurturance and service to others.[41] For example, women's enthusiasm for Prohibition doubtless came from their view of liquor as disrupting home and community through illness, accidents, violence and misspent paychecks.

Women's apparently greater moralism in general may also have come from their stronger attachment to religion. Consistently over the years, women were about 8 percentage points more likely than men to attend church.[42] Women were more likely than men (66 versus 47 percent, on a four-point scale) to say that religion was "very important" in their lives.[43]

Finally, women's greater willingness to limit consumption of alcohol and marijuana (as well as their greater opposition to gambling and guns) may come from the fact that they themselves have been consistently less likely to indulge. In 1947 only 54 percent of women said they drank, compared with 72 percent of men; in 1983 the figures were remarkably similar, 58 versus 71 percent.[44] Men, especially college students, were also far more likely to admit to having used marijuana.[45]

Women's Views and Party Platforms

U.S. political parties have always drawn their strength from shifting coalitions of interest groups and have lacked any very clear and consistent ideological perspective. In all three of the issue areas discussed above, the two major U.S. parties have reversed their positions over the years, while women's views have remained constant. In two cases, political reform and peace, the position supported by women moved form conservative (Republican) to liberal (Democratic). In the other case, sumptuary laws, the position supported by women moved form liberal (Democratic) to conservative (Republican). These confusing switches by the parties help explain why women (along with most other

groups in the population) have not been able to unite as a voting bloc and thus use the political parties as a vehicle to express their views.

For a long time, political scientists held the mistaken view that women were simply more conservative than men. This was based largely on the work of European political scientists[46] who had observed a fairly strong tendency of women to vote more conservative than men in Europe, for reasons that were unique to the European party system, where the left parties were mostly based on unions, which had largely male membership. Since the middle 1970s, women in Europe have no longer been voting conservative.[47] They never consistently did so on this side of the Atlantic.

In the U.S., Prohibition and cleaning up local government had both been part of the "Progressive" package of reforms that had promised to use government to elevate the moral level of society, beginning in the 1880s. This same package had included public health, public education, social services for the poor and other reforms that would still today clearly be considered liberal. However, by the 1920s and '30s the package had broken into several parts and the Prohibition and charter reform parts were not supported by most of the Democratic Party. Many Democratic officeholders were or had been machine politicians themselves. Others perceived that "reformed" charters tended to favor the election of Republicans. Democrats also tended to oppose Prohibition because an important part of their base—urban, immigrant, Catholic voters—saw nothing wrong with a little drink, whereas the rural native-born Protestants who (outside the South) voted Republican were more likely to favor total abstinence, often on religious grounds. On the other hand, New Deal Democrats were strong supporters of social welfare legislation. They pushed through social security, Aid to Dependent Children, unemployment insurance, etc. Republicans, while closer to women on war, prohibition and political reform, were opponents of social welfare measures.

For some women voters, peace was the most salient issue, the one that determined their vote; for others it was sumptuary laws; for others it was political reform. Therefore one does not see a strong and consistent party voting pattern for women and the voting data would not necessarily reveal a tendency by any given women to vote, say, non-interventionist, prohibitionist and political reformist, even though there probably is a tendency for individual women to favor all three of these positions.

The issue of peace, like that of Prohibition, has shifted its

ideological label. Peace had been more a Republican issue in the 1930s, when non-interventionist America Firsters like Republican Senator Vandenberg were outspoken opponents of any policies that might lead to a second world war (against the rightist, anti-Communist Nazis). Peace was identified with neither major U.S. party during the Cold War era of the 1940s and '50s, except that in 1952 Eisenhower successfully presented himself as the peace candidate during the Korean War, thus winning 54 percent of women's votes (and only 46 percent of men's votes). Then peace rather suddenly became more a Democratic issue in the 1960s, in response to the disillusionment of many liberal Democrats with the Vietnam War and with the exercise of U.S. global power in general. Women's views had not shifted. In all the polls about all the wars, women have appeared more "dovish" than men, no matter how the question was worded.

Women's views have also remained the same on the issues of sumptuary laws and political reform, though the issues have changed their form somewhat. Prohibition of alcohol was long dead as a national political issue by the 1960s, but prohibition of marijuana had replaced it. Prohibition of alcohol had originally in the 1880s been part of a "Progressive" package of reforms that also included women's suffrage, free public education, public health laws and other measures that we would today call liberal. The new prohibition (of marijuana) was clearly more strongly identified as a conservative position. Both the old and the new prohibitions tended to be favored more by women than by men. Once again: liberals and conservatives had shifted positions; women had remained constant.

City charter reform still exists as an issue, as a few cities like San Francisco and Oakland still fight over whether to have district or city-wide elections; just as in the past Democrats and liberals tend to oppose the reform position (city-wide elections). In the 1920s charter reform was a major issue; today it is so lacking in salience that no recent poll nor survey data on it was obtainable. The more important reforms today in the area of political corruption are public financing of campaigns, financial disclosure laws and bans on gifts to candidates and influence peddling. And it is the liberals, through groups like Common Cause, who are more likely to support these reforms, though here again there are no poll or survey data broken down by gender. However, in the 1970s and '80s women were significantly (by 4.6 to 6.7 percentage points) more likely than men to say there were "quite a few" dishonest people in government.[48]

In summary, two out of three of the "women's positions" (political reform and peace), as well as most of the miscellaneous

views discussed, are on the liberal side of the political spectrum. (In the 1930s all three—prohibition, political reform and peace—were on the conservative side, but the impact of this alignment was neutralized by women's greater tendency to support social welfare measures.) This unprecedented recent alignment helps explain the emergence of the "gender gap" in the 1980 election—and why it is now in a liberal direction. If there were a political party or movement articulating all of women's preferences into a coherent political philosophy, the gender gap might grow much larger.

After all, women's views—in favor of peace, sumptuary laws, and political reform—have remained unchanged. The party system has simply changed its definition of what was "liberal" and what was "conservative," thus making it appear that women had made a shift that had pushed them to the left of the shadowy center line of American politics.

Of course, it is not reasonable to expect that women's positions on the issues will explain their voting behavior entirely. We cannot ignore factors such as perceptions of the candidates and party loyalty. These two factors certainly play some role for voters of both sexes. However, it is not true, as some political scientists have argued, that women are more candidate-oriented than men, as opposed to party- or issue-oriented.[49] The case that women were more candidate-oriented seems to have been based almost entirely on a misperception of a single presidential election, that of 1952.[50] Women's preference for Eisenhower is much more plausibly explained with reference to the issue of peace, as I have argued above.

When we examine women's party loyalty, an interesting picture emerges. Most of the time men, not women, have been more likely (in varying degrees, some quite small), to be independents, i.e., to have no party affiliation.[51] However, women were more likely to attribute their party identification to habit or inheritance; men were more likely to attribute theirs to agreement with their party's perceived beliefs or identification with social groups they perceived the party as representing.[52] Thus, it appears that women have displayed more party loyalty than men in spite of the fact that neither party reflected their issue preferences with any consistency but out of habit and because family ties have perhaps been more salient for them. In short, women's reasons for greater party loyalty actually reflect the failure of either party to offer consistent support for their issue preferences.

Women have not voted in a way that was as clearly and easily explained by socio-economic status (SES) as men's votes. High

SES men are more likely to vote Republican than high SES women and low SES men are more likely to vote Democratic than low SES women. Berelson et al see this as evidence that women are "less politicized" than men.[53] Perhaps a better interpretation is that SES is simply not as powerful an influence on women's party choice, since it is diluted by the influence of gender. In the area of voter turnout, on the other hand, where SES and gender point in the same directions, SES seems to have a more powerful influence on women than on men. Native-born, white and middle-class women vote more than foreign-born, Black, and working-class women respectively—to a greater degree than this is true among men.[54]

The important point of this analysis, however, is that women have sustained consistent, long-term differences from men in their positions on several important issues yet have rarely translated these differences into a significant gender gap in voting. Even the much-touted gender gaps of the 1980 and '84 presidential elections have amounted to less than 8 percent. Even in elections that offered a very clear ideological choice between liberal and conservative, as currently defined by the parties, neither alternative has consistently reflected women's distinctive views, which did not (and never have) clearly coincided with either liberalism or conservatism.

FOOTNOTES

[1]*Survey Research Center (SRC) American Election Studies*, Ann Arbor: ICPR, 1968, 1970, 1972, 1976, 1980, 1984. No page numbers are given because the raw data were reanalyzed.

[2]William Henry Chafe, *The American Woman: Her Changing Social Economic and Political Roles, 1920-1970*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 262; Keith T. Poole and L. Harmon Zeigler, *Women, Public Opinion and Politics*, New York and London: Longman, 1985, pp. 4-7.

[3]Harold F. Gosnell, *Democracy, The Threshold of Freedom*, New York: Ronald Press Company, 1948, p. 61, Taft, 1933, pp. 138-9.

[4]Robert A. Dahl and William A. Flanigan, *The New Haven Community Study*, Ann Arbor: ICPR, 1971.

[5]*Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1935-71*, Volumes One, Two and Three, New York: Random House, 1972, September 1939, p. 179.

[6]*Ibid.*, October 1941, p. 304-5.

[7]*Ibid.*, 1943, p. 413. (For other illustrations see also *Gallup 1935-71*, August 1936, p. 35; 1942, p. 353).

[8]Angus Campbell, Gerald Gurin and Warren Miller, *The 1952 American Election Study*, Ann Arbor: ICPR, 1971; *Gallup, 1935-71*, 1953, p. 1191.

[9]*Ibid.*, by 72-58%, May 1946, p. 582, by 71-62%, November 1943, p. 424.

[10]Eugene R. Wittkopf, "Elites and Masses: Another Look at Attitudes toward America's World Role," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol, 31, 1987, p. 146.

[11]Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren Miller and Donald Stokes, *SRC 1956, 1958 and 1960 Election Studies*, Ann Arbor: ICPR, 1968 and 1971.

[12]*Gallup 1935-71*, p. 1753.

[13]*Ibid.*, p. 74-75.

[14]*Ibid.*, p. 1969, p. 2222.

[15]*Ibid.*, September 1970, p. 2266.

[16]*SRC American Election Studies*, 1968.

[17]*Gallup 1935-71*, p. 2115, 1968; p. 2224-5, 1969; p. 2237, 1970; p. 2240, 1970; *SRC*, 1968, 1970, 1972.

[18]*Gallup Polls: Public Opinion 1972-75; 1976; 1977; 1978; 1979; 1980; 1981; 1982; 1983; 1984; 1985; 1986*, Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1976, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987 respectively (12 volumes), 1976, p. 468-9.

[19]*Gallup 1935-71*, 1961, p. 1726. See also 1955. p. 1384; 1954, p. 1226.

[20]*Ibid.*, 1971, p. 2317-18.

[21]*National Opinion Research Center*, NORC 1944 Election Study (#229-230), Ann Arbor: ICPR, 1971.

[22]*Gallup, 1935-71*, pp. 2046-7, 2056, 2083.

[23]*SRC American Election Studies*, 1972.

[24]See, for example, W.F. Ogburn and I. Gotra, "A Study of an Election in Portland, Oregon," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 34, September 1919, p. 416, on Multnomah County, Oregon.

[25]*Gallup 1935-71*, p. 1296-7; similar responses on pp. 322, 348, 356, 430, 469, 772 and 1111.

[26]*Gallup 1984*, p. 179.

[27]*Gallup 1935-71*, 1967, p. 2079.

[28]*Gallup 1986*, p. 270.

[29]*Ibid.*, p. 270.

[30]*SRC American Election Surveys, 1972 and 1976; Gallup 1972-5*, 1974, p. 2219-20; *Gallup 1979*, p. 194; *Gallup 1980*, p. 191; *Gallup 1984*, p. 134.

[31]See *Gallup 1935-71*, 1947, p. 645, and *Gallup 1986*, pp. 43-44, and questions on guaranteed job, spending priorities, and food stamps in *SRC American Election Studies, 1964, 1976, 1980, 1984.*

[32]Poole and Zeigler, *Women, Public Opinion and Politics; Gallup, 1935-71*, 1937, p. 67; 1942, p. 322; 1945, pp. 548, 549; 1949, p. 861.

[33]*Gallup, 1935-71*, 1937, p. 48.

[34]*SRC American Election Studies, 1956 and 1960.*

[35]*Gallup, 1935-71*, 1935, p. 103; 1964, p. 1876.

[36]*Gallup, 1972-5*, 1974, p. 376. See also *Gallup, 1935-71*, 1963, p. 1858; *Gallup 1983*, p. 117.

[37]*Gallup 1935-71*, 1937, p. 84; 1960, p. 1659; 1965, p. 1922; 1966, p. 2016; *Gallup 1972-5*, 1972, p. 20-21 and *Gallup 1985*, p. 34-5.

[38]*Gallup, 1935-71*, 1954, p. 1281.

[39]*Ibid.*, 1969, p. 2211.

[40]*Ibid.*, 1937, p. 92.

[41]Gilligan, Carol, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982.

[42]See, for example, *Gallup 1935-71*, 1954, p. 1252, *Gallup, 1986*, p. 279-280, and every year in between.

[43]*Gallup 1976*, p. 624.

[44]*Gallup, 1935-71*, p. 693; *1983*, p. 80.

[45]*Gallup, 1972-5*, 1971, p. 9; 1972, p. 22; 1974, p. 264.

[46]See, for example, Maurice Duverger, *The Political Role of Women*, Paris: UNESCO, 1955.

[47]Carol Mueller, "The Empowerment of Women: Polling and the Women's Voting Bloc," in Carol Mueller, *The Politics of the Gender Gap*, Beverly Hills: Sage, 1988.

[48]*SRC American Election Studies, 1972, two in 1976, 1980 and 1984.*

[49]Campbell et al, *The 1952 American Election Study*, p. 155.

[50]*Ibid.*, p. 10.

[51]See, for example, *NORC 1944;* Campbell et al, *The 1952 American Election Study* and *SRC 1958 Election Study; Gallup, 1935-71*, p. 1048, 1417-18, 1436, 1891, 2081.

[52]*NORC, 1944.*

[53]*Gallup 1935-71*, 1954, p. 61.

[54]Robert E. Lane, *Political Life*, Glencoe: Free Press, 1959, p. 214.